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ABSTRACT

This paper provides some examples of American English that have been borrowed from other cultures and languages, and proposes that teachers develop students' lifelong reading interests through the study of folklore and dialect materials. Language development and appreciation relate to personal identity development insofar as individuals express their personalities and understand their heritage through language usage; this reveals the close relationship between the cognitive and affective aspects of education. The use of folklore and dialect in the classroom is an attempt to narrow the distance between cognitive and affective education. The paper proposes that a meaningful reading program can use a variety of media to present folklore and dialect materials--including tapes, recordings, and films--and that a "Foxfire" student publication can preserve stories and record skills unique to individuals and communities. (RL)

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Language of the American Land - Developing and Applying an Appreciation of
Dialect and Folklore in Reading Instruction

Creating Interest in Reading Through Developing
Appreciation of Dialect

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As teachers, I imagine that we have all shared in this one particular experience. Remember the day you were momentarily lost in your own thoughts while standing hall duty outside your classroom? Suddenly you snapped back because of the loud conversation between two unfamiliar students who had just passed by. You only caught a phrase or two, but none of it made sense. Whatever it was, you knew for sure that the language wasn't really offensive, but it certainly wasn't any form of the standard English dialect that you had been teaching.

In my case, the only part of the conversation that I was able to hear was the phrase, "Humpty Dumpty". Without any context clues, I wasn't sure if the nursery rhyme was being recited, or if someone was being called a Humpty Dumpty, implying quite a bit of disfavor, or even if this name had now been linked to some new meaning that I was unfamiliar with. My previous experience with this word reminded me of the argument Humpty and Alice had on the meaning of words.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean a nice knock-down argument," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

Loosely translated, Humpty Dumpty is arguing that words are tools and, like tools, can be used for whatever purpose is at hand. But Humpty's logic is a little too fast and loose because we recognize that a drill, although a

useful tool, is a poor substitute on a job which requires a pair of scissors. Certainly words are the tools used to build effective communication among people, but they are tools that can be used to destroy as well as to construct effective communication. Any word can have several meanings, and on both the literal and figurative levels, but we must choose those words that build understanding between ourselves and our audience.

On the other hand, Humpty Dumpty strongly favors the creative impulse of our language. He realizes that without this ability that words have to take on new meaning, our language could not grow, nor could we, each of us who experiences the language in our own individual way. In his own way, Humpty Dumpty is making a solid case for the theme of this morning's session. Simply stated, we believe the old adage that, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

Our title, "Language of the American Land", hopefully conjures many mental images.

One of our aims is to convey some of the color and feeling of folklore and some of the richness that dialect offers our language. As our country is a melting pot of folks, so too is our language. English, particularly the American version of it, has been prone to borrowing from the language of other peoples.

From the numerous Indian languages of our land, we have borrowed the words 'pecan' and 'sequoia', 'raccoon' and 'skunk', and even the political term 'caucus'. From their customs, we have borrowed the colloquial understanding of bravery as a willingness to "run the gauntlet."

Our language also reflects the influence of the French culture. When we talk of a 'bayou', 'levee', 'rapids' or 'prairie', we are using French derivations to describe geographical facts. One of the more enjoyable customs we have borrowed from the culture is the pleasure of having our dessert 'a la mode'.

The Spanish influence, perhaps the greatest on our language, is responsible for most of the vocabulary that describes the legendary life of the cowboy. What would the West be without 'rodeo', 'lariat', and 'lasso', 'ranch' and 'corral', 'wrangler' and 'buckaroo', and what would any Western movie be without a 'stampede?'

Among the languages that have helped shape our own, Dutch and German are related to English. 'Hamburger' and 'cookie' are both examples of what we all assume are American institutions. Other traditions thought of as "ours", but that were actually borrowed, are jolly old Santa Claus and the custom of decorating a Christmas tree.

Even with this incomplete listing of examples, it is easy to see why so many people feel that the American land is their home; that their Old World customs and language contributed to the growth of a modern America. But the history of our language isn't just something that happened many yesterdays ago. It's not just each ethnic or racial group's contribution to our heritage. History is a record of the gradual, everyday changes, the every day dynamism of our tongue, because language is the link that binds each individual in every generation to all those before him and all those to come.

This link between man's life and his language brings me to our second aim: the recognition that language development is a part of the individual's identity development. A person expresses his personality, his individual sense of style and his private concept of the world, through the language he uses. This points out the need to make reading instruction a life-related activity, but it also restates the close relationship between affective and cognitive levels of education.

The use of folklore and dialect in the classroom is an attempt to narrow the distance between cognitive and affective education. Students need to develop a sense of identity and achievement from their learning. But it is

also true that students learn what they live. Through the use of folklore, they can be taught the importance of their heritage and the place such traditions have in their own life.

It has been said that we read only what we already know. Perhaps this is oversimplified, but we all do recognize that the process of reading involves bringing meaning to the printed page as well as taking meaning from it. We can see this principle in action if we use familiar folklore in the classroom because it is meaningful experience. The student encounters the written page secure that he has some real experience with what he is reading.

A meaningful reading program can use a variety of media to present folklore and dialect materials.

Tapes and recordings are an excellent way to bring the voice of regional America into your classroom. A recorded story or dialect provides students with an authentic supplement to the printed page. It is a supplement that satisfies their curiosity for hearing the actual sound of the words, but also one which leaves plenty of room for reading between the lines to imagine the personality of the speaker.

Films are also a provoking way to introduce the elements of folk tradition in the classroom. One of the most stimulating class discussions I have witnessed took place after viewing a film which visually interpreted "The Creation", a poem by James Weldon Johnson. Quite a controversy arose over whether it is proper for each generation to interpret tradition in its own language. "The Creation" is a modern version of the story of the beginning that is told in Genesis. One group of students took offense at the poem's everyday language while others felt that, for the first time, the story was relevant to them. In either case, I'm satisfied that both groups had taken the time to consider the appropriateness of their language.

One of the most creative uses of media, known as the Foxfire project, began in Georgia. It involved students working together to publish a magazine. But this magazine was quite different from anything else before it. One of its basic principles was that an interviewer would learn something from, rather than about, others. Foxfire's aim was to publish a magazine that showed the special, the individual, differences of the people of that community. So they set about preserving stories, recording skills and finding out things that were only known by the elders in that Georgia community, those people whose roots set deeper and whose memories served them longer than anybody elses. Today, Foxfire's success is responsible for a number of these folklore magazines: SALT in Maine, BITTERSWEET in the Ozarks, DOVETAIL in Montana and ALL-AH-WEE in the Virgin Islands are just some of the many.

In closing, I would like to leave you with some reflections on language from an author whose writings have had a profound impact on me. In his essay, "My Love Affair With Words," Dylan Thomas explains himself:

"I tumbled for words at once. And, when I began to read the nursery rhymes for myself, and, later, to read other verses and ballads, I knew that I had discovered the most important things, to me, that could be ever. There they were, seemingly lifeless, made only of black and white, but out of them, out of their own being, came love and terror and pity and pain and wonder and all the other vague abstractions that make our ephemeral lives dangerous, great and bearable. Out of them came the gusts and grunts and hiccups and hee-haws of the common fun of the earth."